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ABSTRACT

This digest, drawn from a larger study, looks at six community colleges and community college systems in regard to how they are attempting to serve their urban communities. The author defines urban community colleges as being in or close to major cities, and serving large numbers of economically and educationally disadvantaged students from diverse ethnic groups. In order to provide "gateways to democracy" for all students, urban community colleges must provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for upward mobility. For example, all six of CUNY's Community Colleges (NY) provide remedial courses, enhancing entry into higher education for many nontraditional groups. The Los Angeles Community College District faces a constantly changing demographic landscape that serves the largest Limited English Proficient population in the nation, and expects to accommodate a two-fold increase in its student body by 2005. LA City College serves its community by designing educational opportunities for new U.S. citizens as well as traditionally disadvantaged students. Whether in New York or Seattle, urban community colleges face similar challenges in serving diverse demographics. All colleges seek to provide the kind of liberal arts education that promotes transfer rates, meet the special demands of their particular and diverse student populations, and provide occupational and vocational programs that serve their communities. (AF)

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Gateways to Democracy: Six Urban Community College Systems

by Shannon M. Hirose-Wong

Urban community colleges—those located in or close to major cities—play a key role in higher education by serving economically, educationally, and ethnically disadvantaged, and nationally diverse student populations. These urban institutions face numerous challenges, the most notable of which is a student population largely comprised of individuals with one or more of the following characteristics: income below the poverty line, immigrant status, first-generation college student, a member of an ethnic minority group, in need of remediation, or whose first language is not English. By providing knowledge, skills, and support for upward mobility in society, these institutions are truly "gateways to democracy" for those who might otherwise be denied access to higher education. This digest presents an overview of six urban community colleges and the steps they have taken to serve their communities.

Miami-Dade Community College

Padron and Levitt (1999) discuss Miami-Dade Community College's (M-DCC) internal reforms and community collaborations structured to meet its local challenges. M-DCC continues to provide liberal studies for students wishing to obtain an associate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate institution. However, in addition, M-DCC has developed cutting edge occupational programs geared at training students and stimulating the region's economic growth. These occupational programs are the result of work-force partnerships throughout the community. The "One Community One Goal" regional development plan has identified seven industries crucial to the area's economic growth—biomedicine, film and entertainment, international commerce, education, finance, tourism, and telecommunications and information technology—around which M-DCC has restructured its occupational programs. M-DCC has also recognized the

importance of keeping up-to-date with technology in order to remain competitive with private and proprietary institutions, and to keep its students competitive in today's workforce. Due to its demographic environment, the technological revolution, and economic influences, the future will present M-DCC with many unexpected challenges. Keeping true to its mission to serve the local community while attempting to meet these future challenges will be key in the continuing success of M-DCC students.

CUNY's Community Colleges

Like M-DCC, the City University of New York's (CUNY) six community colleges also face the challenge of serving a diverse student population. By offering open access for remedial, career, liberal, transfer, and community outreach education, these six campuses serve as gateways for individuals who would otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in higher education. The biggest challenge for CUNY is the recent threat to its central mission of providing higher education to this population. CUNY has been the target of recent attacks and challenges on its open enrollment policy and remedial function. Critics contend that remediation should not be a college responsibility, while its supporters assert that function as one that maintains standards and provides the critical opportunity for those who have weakness in certain academic areas, are underprepared because of their previous academic experiences, or may be returning to school after taking several years off. As Reitano (1999) succinctly states, "The question is whether access precludes excellence" (p.32). Despite struggles with new policies that separate remediation from the curriculum and support traditional methods of instruction, CUNY will continue to make efforts to educate "the whole people," including those with limited higher education choices.

Seattle Community Colleges

The three campuses that make up the

Seattle Community Colleges—Seattle Central, South, and North—are also committed to serving urban students. Providing students with what they need to succeed—filling in educational gaps, building self esteem, and breaking down barriers to learning—are the keys to student success, according to Central's president, Charles Mitchell (Hunger, 1999). These factors are of the utmost importance when dealing with a student population that varies greatly in skills, goals, and cultural background. Infused in Central Community College's leadership is the principle to base every decision on what is good for the student. For Central's faculty and administration, providing a comprehensive, academically sound curriculum is the essence of a student-centered educational program. This includes a large transfer program, adult basic education and ESL courses, services for students with disabilities, risk taking and innovation (e.g. an interdisciplinary program adapted from The Evergreen State College's learning communities model), keeping up-to-date with technological advances, and providing quality physical surroundings. Also, through additional funding sources, Central has allocated more for student services than what the state formula budgets. As the demographics of Seattle Community Colleges continue to show an increase in students of color and other underserved students, the efforts to meet student needs will not only be maintained, but increased in order to continue to provide a pathway to equity.

The Los Angeles Community College District

With the constantly changing demographics of a city that is the destination for many newly arrived immigrants, the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) faces a tremendous challenge in serving the largest limited English population (LEP) in the nation. LACCD takes seriously its role of being a political change agent for

its urban community while concurrently serving as an educational change agent for those who are interested in transfer, occupational, personal, and English language education (Fujimoto, 1999). Beyond the responsibility of having to educate its large immigrant and LEP population, LACCD is expected to accommodate a two-fold increase in student population by the year 2005. Adjusting to this influx of students in such a short period of time will be challenging, if not impossible.

A strategy for the future success of LACCD should include:

- Maintaining a broad perspective of its many functions and inclusiveness in its planning
- Incorporating accountability measures and spending controls
- Bringing people together to design educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, the LEP population, and immigrants seeking to become U.S. citizens
- Locating and utilizing external funding and economic development opportunities

Maricopa Community Colleges

Maricopa Community College District (MCCD) serves more than 240,000 students per year. Of the ten colleges that comprise MCCD, four are located in the urban center of Phoenix, with three of them in Phoenix's inner city. MCCD has found alternative sources of funding (e.g. grants, and government and corporate contracts) to address its community's social issues and provide services for its disadvantaged students. In addition, MCCD, through collaborations with community agencies and other funding agencies, has shaped its mission and purpose to adapt to the demographic realities of its community (Elsner, 1999). One of the most successful collaborations that provides programs for its disadvantaged urban population is the Maricopa/Phoenix Think Tank, which is comprised of partnerships between elementary schools, high schools, corporations, community based organizations, and MCCD. Think Tank programs have strengthened technology transfer and training of school personnel, encouraged concurrent high school and community college enrollment, and provided family resource centers for students who suffer from family poverty, separation and loss, dislocation, and violence.

Community College of Baltimore County

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) was formed in 1998 as a result of a merger of three colleges in Balti-

more County. The challenge that CCBC faces is that it is an emerging college that serves a community in transition from suburban to urban, and from serving a privileged population to one that will require greater support. This is a prime moment for CCBC to shape its own future, its students' futures, and the future of Baltimore County (McPhail & Heacock, 1999). In an effort to deal with the transition, the chancellor adopted a plan to promote the development of CCBC into a learning college. *Learning First*, the college's strategic plan, is composed of seven strategic directions. At its core is the direction of student learning. The other six supporting directions include Learning Support, Learning College, Infusing Technology, Management Excellence, Embracing Diversity, and Building Community. This learning plan serves to address the internal restructuring of CCBC, the external transition of the urban population, and accountability to its public by asserting that: (1) all learners deserve a quality education that is matched to their experiences and backgrounds, (2) learning needs to be made easily accessible to the urban learner (e.g. distance learning, on-line learning), (3) students need to be put at the center and be involved in their learning process, and (4) students should be exposed to technology to prepare them to enter the information technology workforce.

Conclusion

The urban community colleges discussed above all face similar challenges in terms of population demographics and how to best serve their diverse communities. These urban institutions all grapple with the issues of providing a liberal arts education, meeting the special demands of their service population (for remedial, ESL, and community education), providing occupational/vocational programs, and serving as agents of social change in their communities. Along with these functions, each college faces unique obstacles that challenge its efforts to provide services to the local community. In order to remain "gateways to democracy," community colleges must continue to find creative ways to provide these services. Community colleges are truly the "democracy college" (Pierce, 1999). Without community colleges, access to higher education and social mobility for the disadvantaged is seriously at risk.

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